

# USDAnews

USDA's Employee News Publication—For You & About You!

## Here At USDA, A Focus On The Future Means A Focus On 'eGov' 24/7, One-Stop Shopping, And No More Stovepiping

by Ron Hall  
Office of Communications

**"T**he game plan for eGovernment, here at the Department, is to make USDA electronically available any place, any time."

**Chris Niedermayer** was describing the vision behind USDA's efforts to incorporate "eGovernment" into virtually all aspects of its operations. Niedermayer, associate chief information officer for eGovernment within the Office of the Chief Information Officer, is the Department's eGovernment executive.

He explained that "eGovernment," or "eGov," is defined as the exchange of products, information, and services through an electronic medium. Examples of such 'electronic media' are the Internet, e-mail, 'call centers' such as USDA's toll-free hotlines which offer assistance to the public, and handheld wireless portable devices such as 'Palm Pilots.'

Last year USDA developed and then published its own "eGovernment strategic plan." Dated June 2002 and titled "eGovernment Strategic Plan, FY 2002-FY 2006," the plan's purpose was to "establish a comprehensive vision and direction for the Department and its agencies for the use of electronic commerce for the next five years." The 66-page plan—which

built upon presidential initiatives promoting eGov efforts governmentwide—highlighted such areas of emphasis as:

- incorporating eGovernment into USDA and agency annual performance planning, business operations, and budgeting,
- building on USDA's current eGovernment capabilities and efforts,
- sharing USDA's best practices, in business and information technology, with partners both internal and external to the Department, and
- avoiding redundancy and duplication—known in eGov parlance as "stovepiping"—and saving money as well, by collaborating on eGovernment initiatives across USDA agencies and with other federal departments.

Niedermayer pointed out that USDA's eGov efforts are focused on three general audiences: USDA's customers, USDA's partners in public and private sector organizations, and USDA's employees.

First, eGov efforts at USDA—which focus on USDA's customers—are designed to improve customers' knowledge of, and access to, USDA—in order to enhance the delivery of USDA information and services. Examples include "eLoans," which allow customers to apply for, obtain, and manage USDA loans via the Internet; "eRulemaking," in which members of the public can offer their comments online concerning proposed rules and regulations authored by USDA agencies; and "eEligibility," which provides electronic "one-stop

*continued on pg. 2...*



"To those pandas, this bamboo leaf will probably look like dessert," quips **Otis Pomerleau** (right), a gardener with NRCS's Jamie L. Whitten Plant Materials Center near Coffeeville, Miss., as Center Manager **Joel Douglas** gets ready to use his machete to cut a shoot of bamboo. They were in the Center's four-acre bamboo plot—the source for the bamboo meals being provided to two giant pandas which recently took up residence at the Memphis Zoo. Note **Jeanine May's** story on page 4.—PHOTO BY **DEBORAH LAIRD**

## With Revised Program, Matching Candidates To Slots Is Faster And Simpler

by Deborah Takiff Smith  
Office of Communications

**H**iring people with disabilities for your office just got easier.

A program that helps Government managers find and then hire people with disabilities has incorporated two changes that will make it easier for USDA hiring officials to find qualified candidates for permanent positions or summer slots.

First, USDA recruiters have been doing more to match up the applicants with the specific needs of individual USDA managers—so the hiring officials' search will be faster

and simpler. Second, USDA initiated a pilot program, which began this year, in which the Secretary's Advisory Committee for Employees with Disabilities—not individual program agencies—is paying for five USDA interns with disabilities who will work all summer at no cost to the hiring agencies.

The Workforce Recruitment Program for College Students with Disabilities (WRP) is a competitive, nationwide Federal government internship program. "Its purpose is to identify qualified persons with disabilities for full-time permanent work or for summer internships," said **Bill Haig**, Departmental Disability Employment Program Manager in the Office of Human Resources Management. The majority of candidates are college students, and the rest have a bachelor's,

*continued on pg. 7...*



# Ann M. Veneman

## Secretary of Agriculture

**M**ay 13, 2003 was the first anniversary of the 2002 Farm Bill. By this time all employees should have received my letter of thanks for the extraordinary effort you put into implementing the new law.

As you know, Farm Bill implementation was and continues to be a massive undertaking. The bill includes 10 titles and over 400 pages with numerous sections and provisions. Literally tens of thousands of USDA employees have played a part in this effort by conducting all sorts of analyses; developing decision documents; writing record numbers of regulations; developing software and websites; preparing reports, studies, correspondence and press releases; convening outreach conferences; signing-up participants; and issuing program benefits. This was a major challenge given the late passage of the bill.

However, there is still much work left to be done particularly in implementing the conservation title of the Farm Bill. The new law expands pre-existing programs and creates two new programs that focus on protecting valuable grasslands and improving forestlands. In addition, President **George W. Bush** has charged USDA to reduce greenhouse gases and to

increase carbon storage through targeted incentives for landowners.

I recently announced that for the first time ever, USDA will factor in greenhouse gas benefits when we set priorities within our conservation programs. These steps will allow our offices and the states to consider carbon sequestration and reductions in methane and nitrous oxide emissions when allocating funds, ranking their activities, and providing support and technical assistance.

Under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, our chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service has already provided guidance to states to reward actions that provide greenhouse gas benefits within the EQIP ranking system. We will follow this up with new standards for low greenhouse gas-emitting technologies, practices, and technical assistance.

The President believes in the creativity, the dedication, and the hard work of the American people to all work toward a healthier and cleaner environment for this generation and all of those who will follow.

As you take up this new challenge I have every confidence in your continued success in serving producers and other program participants. Once again, I thank you for your hard work and dedication. I am proud of all that our employees do. ■

### A Focus On 'eGov'...continued from pg. 1

shopping"—across all USDA agencies—to help a customer determine the USDA programs or services for which he/she is eligible.

"These examples of eGov allow USDA's customers to perform these transactions 24 hours a day, 7 days a week," added **Bob Bonnet**, a branch chief in the Farm Service Agency's farm loan programs area.

Second, USDA's eGov efforts—which focus on the Department's partners in public and private sector organizations—are designed to enhance collaboration between USDA and those organizations. Examples include "grants.gov" or "eGrants," which are designed to provide a centralized web-based access to organizations—such as rural businesses, state/local governments, and universities—so they can more easily access, apply for, and manage their USDA grants; and "ePermits and eCertificates," which provide electronic options for the issuance of permits, certificates, and other regulation-based verifications to USDA's customers and partners.

"These examples of eGov allow the public and private sector organizations to be more efficient and act in a more timely fashion," added **Bob MacDonald**, the information technology policy leader for the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service.

Finally, USDA's eGov efforts—which focus on its employees—are designed to improve internal efficiency by promoting Departmentwide, or 'enterprise-wide,' solutions. Examples include "eAuthentication," in which employees, customers, and/or public/private sector partners rely on privacy-protected user authentications in order to transact business within the Department; "human resources online," in which employees manage human resource-related issues online—and assist in human resource planning and administration—through a common web-based tool; and "eLearning," in which employees can register for training courses and track their progress in completing curricula online—while, at the same time, trainers and managers can track the progress of those efforts online.

"These examples of eGov allow USDA's employees to, instead, focus more of their work day on 'value-added activities' in support of the Department's mission," added **Janet Osorio**, website project manager with the Risk Management Agency.

Osorio pointed out that more examples of eGov at USDA can be found at the Department's eGov web site, [www.egov.usda.gov](http://www.egov.usda.gov)

Niedermayer noted that USDA employees expressed some general sentiments regarding eGov at the Department in a December 2001 survey con-

ducted by OCIO. According to Niedermayer that survey—which was administered via e-mail and the World Wide Web—offered the following picture:

- 47 percent of USDA employees responding to the survey use agency Intranet sites in their work,
- 53 percent of those employees who responded use the Internet for business purposes,
- 76 percent of USDA's responders would like to telecommute,
- 93 percent of the responders feel comfortable using technology and the Internet to complete business tasks,
- 60 percent of the USDA employees responding to the survey either do not receive enough information electronically or do not receive appropriate information electronically, and
- employees who responded are generally aware of the eGovernment tools available for their use. But less than half of those surveyed who responded were aware of USDA eGovernment applications for customers or for public and private organizations.

Niedermayer said that USDA's eGovernment initiatives are approved to move forward as part of the Department's budget and planning process. Its eGov program is working with agency and staff office leadership and cross-agency teams as it implements those initiatives.

"We'll continue our collaborative eGovernment activities with our agencies and staff offices," Niedermayer affirmed. "This is quite an opportunity to accomplish a great deal for USDA's customers, partners, and employees." ■



**Susan Wilzer** (left), the leader of current awareness literature services at NAL, discusses with FSIS program analysts **Sibyl Wright** (center) and **Diane Moore** how to use databases in DigiTop to find information that might be particularly useful to USDA employees. Note **Len Carey's** story on page 7.

—PHOTO BY BOB ANDERSON

# Notes *from USDA Headquarters*

*As USDA celebrated National Agriculture Day and Earth Day, spring also marked the 50th anniversary of the Foreign Agricultural Service and an added task for employees of implementing the Disaster Assistance Act of 2003. That law helps farmers and ranchers who suffered crop or pasture losses in the past two years.*

*In addition, while America's military fought to free the Iraqi people, USDA made new food aid commitments to that country and to Africa. Former Under Secretary for International Affairs and Commodity Programs **Daniel Amstutz** was named to lead Iraqi agriculture reconstruction efforts. Here at home, Secretary **Ann M. Veneman** illustrated for reporters the benefits to farm families of President **George W. Bush's** jobs and economic growth plan, and took great pride in installing the first Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, **Vernon Parker**.*

**FAS's 50th Anniversary:** On March 10, the Secretary marked the 50th anniversary of the Foreign Agricultural Service by announcing that President Bush has designated USDA as the lead agency for implementing the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program. Previously a pilot program, it benefited "nearly 7 million children in 38 countries" who received school meals as part of their education.

**National Agriculture Day:** On March 21, Secretary Veneman observed National Agriculture Day by reminding Americans of the many contributions made by the men and women in agriculture. That ranges from helping feed the people of Iraq to the expectation that agriculture will generate \$56 billion in exports this year, and along with related industries provide millions of jobs for

Americans.

"Our affordable food supply means that Americans spend only about 10 percent of their disposable income on food, lower than almost any other country in the world. And as some of the best stewards of the land, farmers and ranchers provide food and habitat for 75 percent of our country's wildlife," the Secretary said.

**Earth Day 2003:** On the 33rd Earth Day, Secretary Veneman traveled to a farm in Maryland to announce the next Conservation Reserve Program signup. In addition, she released more than \$1.8 billion in conservation assistance funds for working farmlands.

**Disaster Assistance Act Of 2003:** As Farm Service Agency employees finished up explaining options to farmers regarding their crop bases and yields for farm program participation under the 2002 farm bill, Secretary Veneman announced producers with qualifying losses in either 2001 or 2002 crops could sign up for disaster payments beginning June 6.

"We are committed to getting assistance into the hands of affected producers as quickly as possible. USDA's response time is several weeks ahead of the Department's timetables during the last major disaster aid package, even though this is a more complicated bill to implement. And again, I want to thank our team for their tireless efforts in that regard," she said.

**Amstutz Tapped To Lead Iraqi Agriculture Reconstruction:** Former Under Secretary for International Affairs and Commodity Programs Daniel Amstutz was named in late April as senior advisor on agricultural reconstruction efforts in Iraq. He served at USDA from 1983-87. Secretary Veneman said, "He will help us achieve our national

objective of creating a democratic and prosperous Iraq while at the same time best utilize the resources of our farmers and food industry in the effort, both in the interim and for the longer term."

**The "Agriculture Fact Book 2001-2002":** The new fact book, released March 27, includes general information and statistical data about American food consumption, the agricultural sector, and rural America. The book also describes USDA's wide-ranging programs and services. The "Agriculture Fact Book 2001-2002" can be accessed at [www.usda.gov/factbook](http://www.usda.gov/factbook)

**Vernon Parker Becomes USDA's First Assistant Secretary For Civil Rights:** See "Profile Plus" on page 6.

**Farm Bill Implementation Hits The One-Year Mark:** May 13 marked the one-year anniversary of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002. The Secretary issued a letter thanking USDA employees for their success in implementing the new law (see *Secretary's Column* on page 2).

**USDA Food Safety Mobile Hits The Road:** In mid-March, the Food Safety and Inspection Service christened a 35-foot recreational-style vehicle, which began a nationwide tour of a number of communities across the nation. The USDA Food Safety Mobile "will educate millions of people about the risks associated with mishandling food and how they can reduce their risk of food-borne illness," the Secretary said.

**Healthy Forests Initiative:** Changes needed to fully implement President Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative moved closer to reality with approval of legislation by the U.S. House of Representatives on May 20. The legislation now moves



*The USDA Food Safety Mobile is emblazoned with bold, eye-catching graphics and prominent food safety messages. FSIS public affairs specialist **Laura Reiser** said that the Mobile most recently made an appearance, on May 21 and May 24, in the "500 Festival," in conjunction with the "Indy 500" auto race in Indianapolis.—**PHOTO BY ANSON EAGLIN***

to the U.S. Senate for consideration. "This will allow us to do the fuels treatment work that is vitally important so we can get ahead of these disastrous fires," said Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment **Mark Rey**.

**Jobs And Economic Growth Plan:** President Bush signed into law the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003 on May 28. It will deliver substantial tax relief to 136 million American taxpayers.

The law increases the per child tax credit from \$600 to \$1,000. The President said, "the combination of income tax rate reductions, a higher child credit, and a reduction in the marriage penalty will make a difference for families in every part of this country. A family of four with a total income of \$75,000 will receive a 19 percent reduction in federal income taxes, saving \$1,122 per year, per family. A family of four with an income of \$40,000 will see their income taxes drop from \$1,178 to \$45, a 96 percent tax cut. And under this new law, 3 million individuals and families will have their federal income tax liability completely eliminated. Altogether, 34 million families with children, including 6 million single moms, will receive an average tax cut of \$1,549 per year." For a fact sheet on how farmers are affected go to

[www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov).  
—**PATRICIA KLINTBERG**

# Employees *make these things happen*

## Natural Resources and Environment

### NRCS Provides The Bamboo; "Thanks!" Say The Pandas

"We'll have an order of bamboo, with a side of sugar cane, please!"

If pandas could talk, that might be the standard request from **Le Le** and **Ya Ya**, giant pandas from China which are the newest residents of the Memphis Zoo. And thanks to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, their bamboo meal requests are being answered.

**Ya Ya**—pronounced "Yah Yah"—is a two-year-old, 140-lb. female giant panda which came from the Beijing Zoo. **Le Le**—pronounced "Luh Luh"—is a four-year-old, 160 lb. male giant panda from the Shanghai Zoo. They both arrived



*"Less filling? Tastes great? I don't care! Bring me more!" Ya Ya declares—or so we think—as she contentedly chomps on a shoot of bamboo. —PHOTO BY DEBORAH LAIRD*

at the Memphis Zoo on April 7 and then, following a mandatory 'acclimation period,' made their public debut on April 25.

"Pandas in zoos consume 20 to 40 pounds of bamboo each day, in addition to sugar cane and other vegetables," noted **Joel Douglas**, manager of NRCS's Jamie L. Whitten Plant Materials Center near Coffeeville, Miss.

"The Memphis Zoo is trying to cultivate its own supply of bamboo, but bamboo is slow to grow, and its supply definitely isn't ready yet," he explained. "So the zoo had to locate a readily available supply of bamboo before the pandas would be allowed to leave China for Memphis."

"That's where we came into the picture."

**Janet Grabowski**, an NRCS agronomist at the Plant Materials Center, recounted that in the 1960s plant materials specialists with the [then] Soil Conservation Service began growing and evaluating "Oriental bamboo" experimentally, at the Center, for erosion control purposes. "It was part of a project to see if bamboo would

help with stream bank erosion and serve as a buffer for windbreaks in the Mississippi Delta," she said.

That idea was ultimately abandoned because bamboo turned out to be very unmanageable. However, it is still growing on about four acres at the Center. "It's hard to initially establish, but once it's growing it may become invasive and quick to spread," Grabowski advised. "Here at the Center it's not really a problem, but it would cost too much to try to eliminate it—so we just let it be."

Memphis Zoo officials knew about the bamboo growing at the Center, which is located about an hour's drive south of Memphis. So they contacted NRCS about the possibility of partnering on the project of bringing two pandas from China to the zoo. Last fall, **Homer Wilkes**, NRCS's state conservationist for Mississippi, based in Jackson, signed an agreement with Memphis Zoo officials to allow the zoo to harvest the bamboo growing at the Center.

**Otis Pomerlee**, an NRCS gardener at the Center, explained that a truck from the zoo makes the trek to the Center, and zoo per-

sonnel do the harvesting of the bamboo, which they get for free.

**Tricia Taylor**, an NRCS secretary at the Center, added that **Ya Ya**—which means "beautiful little girl" in Chinese—and **Le Le**—which translates as "happy happy"—no doubt appreciate the deliveries of that dietary staple. "That's because during a typical day, a panda spends 14 hours eating and the other 10 sleeping," she said.

"We're happy to help keep those pandas happy," affirmed NRCS gardener **Jon Allison**. "And we can give them seconds on bamboo anytime!"

—JEANNINE MAY



*"Yeah, this bamboo is as high as an elephant's eye—and then some," affirms NRCS's Joel Douglas, as he treks through NRCS's bamboo plot. —PHOTO BY DEBORAH LAIRD*

## Rural Development

### Our Strong Ties With Co-op Make For 'Happy Ending'

When **Kenya Bradley Nicholas**, a loan specialist with the Electric Program in the Rural Utilities Service, was assigned to respond to a letter written to President **George W. Bush** from a resident of North Carolina, it didn't seem out of the ordinary. "Many letters ultimately come to USDA from people asking for help with their personal lives," she observed.

But the outcome of *this* letter ended up with a particularly happy ending, because of a strong USDA working relationship with a rural electric cooperative.

"Our administrator, **Hilda Legg**, has emphasized," said Nicholas, "that responsive customer service should be a major feature of our jobs as RUS employees." So Nicholas checked to see if the woman who had written the letter—asking for help with her utility bills—was served by an RUS Electric Program borrower. "I found out that the woman, who lives in Winnabow, North Carolina, is

served by the Brunswick Electric Membership Corporation in Shallotte, North Carolina," she said.

Bradley had worked with that rural electric cooperative before and knew its employees. So she called **Chip Leavitt**, its general manager. "I asked him if he'd check on the woman and see what could be done about the situation," she said.

It turns out that the woman had been a lifelong member of that rural electric cooperative. When co-op field supervisor **Tim Tippet** visited her, he found an 84-year-old woman in a wheelchair, living in her childhood home—but with only one room being heated.

"The woman had serious financial problems—but it hadn't come to the attention of the co-op because she had been paying her electric bill on time," Bradley noted. "But her gas for heat had been cut off and she had cancelled her phone service because she decided she couldn't afford it."

Tippet, in turn, reported back to the co-op management that the cooperative would want to

find a way to help the woman. In fact, the next day he took her a package of food and an assurance that more help was on the way. Co-op staffers conferred with the local sheriff's office—which provided an additional delivery of food, household supplies, and some clothes. "Co-op employees took up a collection to help their neighbor," Bradley added.

In addition, co-op staffers contacted the local Social Services agency to make sure the woman was receiving the types of assistance from that agency for which she was eligible. And co-op staffers told her to not worry about her electric bills while her situation was being worked out.

"The White House forwarded the woman's letter to several agencies, USDA being one," Bradley affirmed. "And here in RUS we had the relationship with the appropriate local electric cooperative—plus the initiative to check out the situation."

"The co-op and its local community did the rest."

—CLAIBORN CHAIN

# Editor's Roundup

*USDA's people in the news*



**M**ike Torrey is the deputy assistant secretary for congressional relations.

Before joining USDA, from 2002 until his appointment to this position Torrey served as vice president of legislative affairs for the Washington, DC-based International Dairy Foods Association, after having been its senior director for legislative affairs from 1998-2002. During the 1990s he worked as a legislative assistant to three [then] U.S. Senators representing Kansas: **Bob Dole**, **Nancy Kassebaum**, and **Sheila Frahm**, where he concentrated on agricultural policy and related issues.

**Wanda Worsham**, the previous deputy assistant secretary for congressional relations, retired from that position following over 31 years of federal service. ■



**R**uthie Jackson is the director of the Office of Human Resources Management.

From August 2001 until her selection to this position Jackson served as associate administrator for regional operations in the Food and Nutrition Service. She was regional administrator of FNS's Southwest Region, based in Dallas, from 1992-2001. The May 1992 issue of the **USDA News** carried her complete biographical sketch, following her selection to that position.

**Donna Beecher**, the previous director of OHRM, retired from that position following 33 years of federal service. ■



**P**eter Fernandez is the associate administrator of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Health Inspection Service.

Fernandez, who served as APHIS's associate deputy administrator for international services from 2000-2002, has 13 years of service with the agency. He began his career with APHIS in 1990 as a veterinary medical officer in Georgetown, Texas. He served as APHIS's regional director for South America, stationed in Santiago, Chile, from 1998-2000, after having been the agency's regional director for Mexico, stationed in Mexico City, from 1995-98.

**Bobby Acord**, the previous associate administrator of APHIS, is now the agency's administrator. ■



**J**oe Colantuoni is the deputy director of the Office of Human Resources Management.

Management.

Before joining USDA, from July 1998 until his selection to this position Colantuoni served as director of human resources services at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. He was director of the Management Systems Improvement Group at the U.S. Department of Education from 1994-98. He began his federal career in 1974 as a hearings analyst, preparing disability cases for administrative law judges with the U.S. Social Security Administration in New York City. From 1969-74 he taught junior high school math in Brooklyn, N.Y.

**Bob Whiting**, the previous deputy director of OHRM, retired from that position following 40 years of federal service. ■



**D**wayne Buxton is the deputy administrator of the National Program Staff in the Agricultural Research Service.

Agricultural Research Service.

From February 1997 until his selection to this position, Buxton served as a national program leader on ARS's National Program Staff, where he concentrated on research on oilseed crops, including soybeans, sunflowers, and peanuts, plus small acreage crops such as guayule. He was the research leader of ARS's Field Crop Research Unit in Ames, Iowa from 1990-97. He joined ARS in 1981 as a lead research scientist in Ames, concentrating on 4-H crop production and quality.

**Darwin Murrell**, the previous deputy administrator of ARS's National Program Staff, retired from this position following 32 years of federal service. ■



**J**im Bradley is the deputy administrator for administrative and financial management in the Agricultural Research Service.

Service.

From August 2001 until his selection for this position Bradley served as ARS's associate deputy administrator for administrative and financial management. He began his career with ARS in 1991 as its deputy director of personnel, after having been deputy chief for affirmative employment programs with the Office of Personnel Management from 1988-91. He began his full-time career with USDA as a personnel staffing specialist with the Food Safety and Inspection Service in Minneapolis, Minn., in 1978, and worked in USDA's [then]

Office of Personnel from 1984-87.

**Wiz Horner**, ARS's previous deputy administrator for administrative and financial management, retired from that position following 29 years of federal service. ■



**R**alph Iwamoto is the deputy administrator for international services in the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

From December 2000 until his selection to this position Iwamoto served as APHIS's associate deputy administrator for international services. He has worked for APHIS for over 37 years, starting as a plant quarantine inspector with the agency's Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) Unit at JFK International Airport in New York City in 1965.

Iwamoto worked in various American embassies in APHIS foreign service for the agency's International Services Unit for 16 years from 1984-2000. This included serving as the officer in charge in San Jose, Costa Rica from 1990-93, and the area director in Tokyo, Japan from 1993-96. In 1996 he became the regional director for the agency's International Services Asia and Pacific Region, based in Tokyo, where his responsibilities covered 28 countries from mainland China through New Zealand and westward to India and Pakistan.

**Angel Cielo**, the previous deputy administrator for international services, is now regional director of APHIS's Screwworm Program and Central America, based in Panama City, Panama. ■



**Jan Lang** looks at soil with a totally unique perspective—in fact, she paints with it.

Recently some of her “soil paintings” made their public debut.

Lang, a physical science technician with the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s National Soil Survey Lab in Lincoln, Neb., said that, “Here in the Lab I’ve always noticed the many beautiful colors of the soils, that come from all over the country and from around the world as well, that we analyze as part of our mission.”

Last year NRCS put out a call for creative ideas for an agency display to help commemorate the bicentennial of the expedition of **Meriwether Lewis** and **William Clark**, who had journeyed forth to explore lands, west of the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, from 1803 to 1806.

“When I heard about that,” Lang

recounted, “it occurred to me that we could use soil to create paintings to depict the Lewis and Clark experience. And, as a bonus, it would be a great way to celebrate America’s natural resources—especially our landscapes and soils, in the context of the Lewis and Clark expedition.”

Accordingly, Lang—who observed that she hadn’t done any painting in 25 years—used soil samples from the Lab to develop her unique art form. “We take some of the soil samples,” she explained, “and put them through a very fine mesh to make a ‘soil powder.’ I then mix the soil powder with water and a clear acrylic paint—which is a glue-like substance that adheres the soil to the paper. What I’ve then created is ‘soil paints.’”

“The trick with painting landscapes is that it’s normally hard to get the color right,” she pointed out. “But when I paint with soil, the color comes from nature—and it’s exactly right.”

Using these ‘soil paints’—which

come in virtually all colors except blue and whose thickness varies depending on the amount of water added to the mix—she employed such tools as artist paintbrushes, sticks, sponges, spatulas, and pins on watercolor paper to depict scenes from the Lewis and Clark Trail. Such scenes included an American Indian showing Lewis and Clark how to burn the prairie to encourage new plant growth in the spring and entice the buffalo to return to Indian hunting grounds, and Clark’s slave, **York**, as he hunted buffalo.

Lang said she took her inspiration from photos she had seen and from descriptions of soils and landscapes that NRCS soil scientists had discovered in the Lewis and Clark journals. NRCS public affairs specialist **Suzanne Pender** pointed out that Lewis and Clark had specific instructions from President **Thomas Jefferson** to report on factors of the land that would show its potential for agricultural uses.

“President Jefferson wanted the explorers to describe ‘...the soil & face of the country, its growth and vegetable productions, especially those not of the United States...,’” Pender said.

The Lewis and Clark commemoration kicked off in mid-January at Monticello—Jefferson’s historic home—in Charlottesville, Va. As part of that commemoration both NRCS and the Forest Service unveiled exhibits, on the University of Virginia campus in Charlottesville. The January-March 2003 issue of the **USDA News** carried a story on USDA’s role in the commemoration, including those two exhibits.

Fourteen of Lang’s soil paintings were on display as part of NRCS’s exhibit. She helped to staff that exhibit.

“My experience there,” she affirmed, “reminded me that people are absolutely amazed at the variety of colors that soils come in, here in this country.”

—**JOANNA POPE**

## PROFILE PLUS *Introducing: Vernon Parker*



**T**he first-ever assistant secretary for civil rights is undaunted about the tangle of civil rights complaints he inherited when confirmed by the U.S. Senate on April

1. **Vernon Parker** acquired the attributes that make him uniquely qualified for this job from a six-year stint as interim pastor at Calvary Church of the Valley in Paradise Valley, Ariz., as well as 12 years in government

service: four of them as general counsel then director of policy for the Office of Personnel Management. From this experience he learned patience, the depths of compassion, and to listen while leading.

“We want USDA to be looked at as a model of change,” Parker said of his mission. “I will try to implement a vision that is shared by the Secretary and the President of making sure that those who we serve are treated with dignity and respect and those who we serve are the 100,000-plus USDA employees and all the people who take part in our programs.”

Parker, a native of Houston who grew up in southern California, said his days as a pastor put his new job in perspective. “When you are dealing with human nature, with hurt, with pain, with death, with family tragedies—it is heartrending—sitting at someone’s bedside at the hospital when they die, comforting the spouse who is surviving, and showing true compassion for their feelings at the same time. Pastor was the most difficult job I’ve ever had, but it was the most rewarding job too.”

The 2002 Farm Bill created the position Parker now holds. He said early on some questioned his lack of a background in agriculture. “But that has served to my advantage,” he said, “because I have surrounded myself with wonderful staff who know what can and cannot work and what has and has not been tried. It gives me the opportunity to say, ‘Why can’t we do these things?’”

Parker and his staff are in the midst of implementing a 90-day plan of rapid-fire changes aimed at moving the logjam of civil rights cases. “It pains me to know we have cases that have been around for two or three years. If you are in a hostile environment and your file is in the middle of a

stack not being examined, shame on us. If after one year, we still have 2,036 cases in inventory, then I am not doing my job.”

How will the Office of Civil Rights handle complaints of discrimination? “We serve two clients who don’t always see eye to eye: employees and customers. If there has been discrimination then there has to be accountability. But due process is also part of our system because we cannot just accuse someone without giving them a chance to be heard.”

Parker, who is an attorney, asks “Put yourself in that situation. Did you discriminate or is there a perception that you discriminated or were you just carrying out the policies of the agency? The American adage, that everyone should have their day in court, still prevails.”

Although just two months have passed since his confirmation, Parker is already getting more mail than **Smokey Bear**, according to the agency mailman who keeps tab on these statistics. Still, Parker said, “At the end of the day, I have no doubt that we will succeed, but if there are obstacles, no one will ever be able to say we didn’t try—and didn’t try with all our heart.”

**Last Book Read:** Parker is reading these three at once: “*Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*,” by **Ronald C. White, Jr.**; “*Disgrace*,” by **J.M. Coetzee**; “*What’s So Amazing About Grace?*” by **Philip Yancey**

**Hobbies:** Cooking, just about all sports, wine tasting

**Favorite Food:** Anything prepared by Chef **Vincent Guerithault**, recently named the 23rd best chef in the world, who resides in Phoenix, Ariz.

**Last Movie Seen:** “*Raising Victor Vargas*”

**Last TV Show:** “*Frasier*”

**Favorite Weekend Breakfast:** Fresh berries with cream, Frittata with potatoes, prosciutto ham, goat’s cheese, aregula and fresh, squeezed orange juice.

**Priorities in the Months Ahead:** “Reduce our inventory of cases and institutionalize policy changes that will prevent the growth of another backlog. Our greatest challenge ahead is to restore the confidence that may be lost by those we serve, including farmers and employees and all those affected and touched by USDA programs. And I want to get the positive word out about some of the good things happening at USDA.”

—**PATRICIA KLINTBERG**

# Administrative *nuggets*

## Helping All Our Employees To Become 'Information Haves'

Up-to-date science and information are both important to developing conservation strategies for threatened or endangered species. So one of the things **Scott Stoleson** likes about "DigiTop"—the National Agricultural Library's new "digital desktop" library for USDA—is that it's now easy for him to quickly get the information he needs from his own USDA desktop computer at his office in rural western Pennsylvania.

Stoleson, a Forest Service research wildlife biologist at the agency's Forestry Sciences Lab in Warren, Pa., said he understands the need to keep in touch with current science. He has been studying the Cerulean Warbler and other bird species with populations on the edge of extinction.

"The nearest good university library is several hours away," he advised. "But DigiTop's speed and convenience let me review the scientific literature in my field—and still have

more time for my research."

"I like that."

Stoleson said that tasks which used to take an entire day's commitment to library resources can now be done in an hour or two at his desk.

NAL Deputy Director **Eleanor Frierson** led NAL's DigiTop initiative. She explained that DigiTop was developed to provide USDA employees with access to key scientific journals, news services, statistics, databases, and other important information resources.

"With USDA employees using the Internet, and with many important books, journals, reference materials, and other information increasingly available electronically," she advised, "we looked for a way to put those two factors together and give everyone at USDA access to the vital information they need."

"While there might have been 'information haves' and 'have nots' at USDA in the past, DigiTop's abil-

ity to deliver thousands of information resources directly to an employee's computer means that now everyone at the Department can be an 'information have'."

Frierson pointed out that DigiTop connects USDA employees to a wide variety of information sources—such as literally thousands of full-text professional and scientific journals; more than 500 newspapers; several of the most respected scientific databases; and the "Yellow Book Leadership" directories which delineate key institutional leaders in all levels of government, business, professional, and non-profit organizations.

NAL combined funding contributed by several USDA agencies to purchase USDA-wide "starter" licenses to this information, at lower, library rates paid through NAL, for 2003—which is the pilot year for DigiTop. "The result," she noted, "is a considerable amount of information available

everywhere in USDA and around the clock—24/7—at a lower per-employee cost." She added that NAL is pursuing sustained support for DigiTop for beyond the pilot year.

USDA employees, contractors, and cooperators can access DigiTop through its web site—[www.nal.usda.gov/digitop](http://www.nal.usda.gov/digitop)—directly from a USDA computer. For USDA employees who use university or other non-USDA computers for their USDA work, access via a proxy server is available by contacting the DigiTop team at NAL, at [DigiTop@nal.usda.gov](mailto:DigiTop@nal.usda.gov).

Stoleson, who connects directly to the DigiTop web site from his USDA computer, said he uses the site so often that he has it bookmarked on his web browser.

"DigiTop is invaluable to me and my fellow Forest Service researchers," he emphasized. "It's perhaps the tool I use most frequently—and most productively."

—**LEN CAREY**

### ***Faster And Simpler...continued from pg. 1***

master's, Ph.D., or JD degree.

"The program itself doesn't actually hire anyone," Haig clarified. "It just offers officials a look at a highly qualified talent pool of students able to do the jobs managers need to fill. The WRP program is very flexible; once managers identify a qualified candidate, they can use any hiring authority available to bring the person on staff."

"What's different about the program this year is that our USDA WRP recruiters are providing more help to managers," said **Terry Thir**, Departmental Disability Program Manager in the Office of Civil Rights.

"Nine of us recruiters met with USDA's Disability Employment Program Managers in all USDA mission areas to learn about agencies' hiring needs, so we could do a better job of finding applicants who seem especially well suited for USDA jobs," she explained. "Then, we fanned out across the country in January and February to interview several hundred students at more than 40 colleges who might have an interest in the USDA intern program."

"Armed with this information," Thir added,

"the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor created a database of all the students, including their education level, location, and job interests."

In mid-March, OHRM provided to all of USDA's agency-level Disability Employment Program Managers a CD-ROM containing this data, which they were expected to share with managers who wanted to search for people with the education and skills to match their programs' needs.

According to **Samantha Schmucker**, USDA's WRP coordinator in OHRM, "A new improvement for this year is that, in addition to making the CD-ROM available, the USDA recruiters also identified more than 60 students who seemed especially well suited for USDA jobs. By carefully screening candidates, and matching them up with specific skills and experiences needed by a particular USDA office, the recruiters created a short list of exceptional candidates that was made available in March to all interested managers at USDA."

Once employers see the students' profiles—either on the CD-ROM or on the short list—they can contact them directly for possible interviews and job offers. As of May 21, six USDA agencies

had hired 15 employees through WRP.

According to Schmucker, the summer intern program offers hiring officials:

- Candidates who are pre-screened in face-to-face interviews,
- Information about applicants' qualifications,
- Referral pools tailored to specific job requirements,
- Access to candidates across the nation, and
- The chance to conduct independent interviews after getting referrals from the WRP program.

In turn, she noted, WRP interns can:

- Undertake special projects postponed for lack of time or resources,
- Assist permanent staff with assignments or projects,
- Share specialized knowledge and innovative technical skills.

"I hope that hiring officials and program managers across the Department will take advantage of this chance to help meet their disability hiring goals while attracting qualified staff for permanent positions or for summer hires," Schmucker emphasized.

"The program works." ■





While the grain barge "Free Atlas" (in background) lies in port at Galveston, Texas, Deputy Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services **Jim Butler** (at podium) notes the start of the journey, on April 3, of 28,000 metric tons of hard red winter wheat—destined for Iraq. "When milled, today's shipment of 28,000 tons of hard red winter wheat from the farms of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas will provide every man, woman, and child in Iraq with almost one pound of flour," he affirmed. See related information on page 3.—**PHOTO BY LUIGI CRESPO**

**U.S. Department of Agriculture**  
**1400 Independence Ave, SW**  
**Washington, DC 20250**



OFFICIAL BUSINESS  
 PENALTY FOR PRIVATE USE, \$300



## Help Us Find Gisela Giraldo

Missing: **10-16-2002** From: **Wakefield, MA**  
 D.O.B. **5-5-1987** Sex: **Female**  
 Hair: **Brown** Eyes: **Brown**  
 Height: **5 ft. 3 in.** Weight: **125 lbs.**

*If you have information, please call*  
**1-800-843-5678**

NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING AND EXPLOITED CHILDREN

## USDA-Sponsored Calendar Highlights

### ■ June 13

*USDA Honor Awards Ceremony*  
 Washington, DC  
 (202) 690-0266 or (202) 720-6382 (TTY)

### ■ June 24-30

*2003 National Ag in the Classroom  
 Conference*  
 Nashville, Tenn.  
 (202) 720-7925 or 1-800-877-8339 (TTY)